

Minute of Best Practices Committee of April 18, 2008

The meeting was called to order at 4:05 PM in the Board Room of the DPW.

Present were committee members Wendy Foxmyn, Alex Ghiselin, Jim Palermo, Lisa DePiano, Michael Bardsley and Bob Reckman. David Narkewicz was absent. Mary Kasper was present as a member of the public. Bonnie Rose and Chris Hughes arrived a few minutes late. The meeting was taped for future broadcast by NCTV.

Lisa called the meeting to order and reviewed the agenda.

Mary Kasper addressed the meeting about how complex it was for her and Fran Volkmann to find examples of best practices in other communities. This is because the search terms are not always obvious. She encouraged the committee to find other volunteers to help with this research. She also volunteered her services in this area. Jim Palermo agreed that we need to identify the various types of decisions that are made within the City and select a limited number of such types since we do not have time to deal with all issues. He also said that New York and Vancouver, with professional assistance, took five years each to complete their studies. A method such as a case study would provide some measure of what was good, or not good about our processes. In addition, he suggested that public comment be focused, and noted as an example, the presentation that Dr. Norton made in Easthampton, regarding the landfill, which very effectively provided the public with technical information. He agreed that we should strive to avoid contentiousness, but noted that sometimes, especially when a private citizen seeks to protect his/her legal rights, it may be necessary to engage in adversarial proceedings.

Wendy expressed a desire to have someone other than a committee member take the minutes. Graham has not been available to take our minutes because he has problems getting to the meetings on time. The committee agreed that it would be great if we could find an intern who can take good minutes.

The minutes of our last meeting were approved.

We brainstormed about what approaches we might take as part of our discovery process. Wendy Foxmyn kept a list. The items included were:

- Case studies of previous municipal decisions in Northampton.
- A subcommittee to make recommendations for the rezoning committee
- Research into best practices in other communities.
- Forums for community input
- Random video interviews of people downtown about their knowledge of the city's structures and organization.
- Encourage use of the meeting review form that Wendy developed.
- An informal "coffee house" setting where people can talk about their experiences with City Government.
- Interview members of City Boards and Commissions and Department heads about what things they think work well and what do not.
- Review the process for appointments to City Board and Commissions. Should there be term limits? What happens when meetings run on very long?
- Look into ways to make the City's budget more comprehensible to the citizens.
- Sponsor focus groups to assess citizen concerns.
- Prepare a city guidebook to explain its political organization to the citizens.
- Have a listening project
- Create press releases about our activities.
- Create a media kit with contact information about the press for use by City Boards and Commissions.
- Identify meeting spaces that are available in the City.
- Distribute a satisfaction survey widely.
- Look into places where information can be posted publicly.

We had 1 on 1 conversations with our neighbors to talk about which of these topics members are interested in. A list was made showing who had expressed interest in what.

Wendy discussed her memo about proposed subcommittees.

Lisa proposed that at the forum we break into small groups based on each item on the subcommittee's list to see if there are members of the public interested in working on them.

Michael said that he is outcome oriented and suggested that we focus on 6 different areas for our subcommittees.

- Outreach and press releases.

- Planning Board and its procedures,

- The City Council and its rules.

- Develop meeting guidelines and protocols for City Boards and Commissions.

- Look at ordinances other than Zoning.

- Look at the City Charter.

Mary Kasper said that she thought that citizens do not care about the City Charter and changing it. She hopes that one thing that will come from the committees work is a way to reach out to stakeholders very early in the process. Once things get to the Planning Board, they are almost always adversarial and rules constrained.

Graham King arrived at 5:20 PM.

Lisa DePiano suggested that we form a working group to identify what subcommittees we should have. Wendy, Alex and Michael volunteered for the working group. They will meet, prepare a few paragraphs describing possible subcommittees, and distribute their recommendations to the BPC before our next meeting.

Bonnie Rose described the planning for the forum on May 13. Lisa had distributed an agenda before the meeting. There was discussion about how it would be organized and what the outreach will be. Members of city boards and commissions as well as City Department heads and elected officials will be notified by e-mail. Wendy will arrange for Corrine to do this. Alex suggested that members of the BPC make a personal effort to encourage attendance at the forum.

Lisa DePiano delivered a report by David about providing copies of committee documents. Lyn can make copies for the committee if we need less than 100 copies. If we need more copies it may have to be done outside. In most cases the cost will be paid by the City Council budget. David also said that if the committee receives any donations or grants we should establish our own bank account. State law makes receipt of such monies into City accounts very complicated. Lisa will e-mail the report to the committee.

Graham King delivered a report on town gown relations in Cambridge. He reviewed the mission statement of the Town Gown committee and give us copies of their recommendations and reports that they gather from the institutions and provide to the public. This information is based on the link on the best practices web site.

Bob Reckman delivered a brief report on Portland's Best Practices Manual. He recommended that committee members read it carefully. It might be helpful in guiding the activities of the rezoning committee,

Michael talked about the meeting last night between the Planning Board and the City Council about the structure of the Rezoning Committee that is recommended by Sustainable Northampton. He will let the committee know what happens in the discussion group set up by the City Council and the Planning Board. He serves on that group.

The next meeting of the committee will be on Friday May 9 at 4 PM in a location to be determined by the chairs.

The meeting adjourned at 6:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted;

Bob Reckman